

Halo 2: Frontline

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Summary: The prelude to Descent of High Charity, Frontline follows Nathan Price through Cairo, Earth, and Delta Halo . . .

1. Prologue

****DISCLAIMER: ****I don't own Halo, Halo 2, or anything related to Halo or Halo 2 . . .

****SECTION I****

****Cairo Station****

****Prologue: Promotion****

I blinked sleepily, rolling over in the bunk. I angrily slammed my fist against the bleating alarm clock, and continued the process until the terrible torture device shut up. I closed my eyes again, happily, stretching in the thin sheets. I rolled over again and hugged the pillow.

"Well, well," a voice said from far away. "Looks like Lance Corporal Price doesn't feel like joining us today . . ." Sniggers in the background. "Shall we wake him up?" The voice continued. I felt a growing sense of alarm, even in my exhausted state.

"Lance Corporal!" screamed a voice in my ear, jolting me out of bed. It was none other than Sergeant Major Johnson. My fellow Marines watched from behind him, snickering in an excellent show of camaraderie. "Get out of bed, give me fifty, and then sprint this message to the bridge!" He handed me a sheet of the old-fashioned notebook paper. Everyone knew he could easily comm the bridge, which would be twice as fast. Everyone also knew the Sergeant Major loved watching his underlings suffer.

Still sleepy, I got out of bed and dressed as the crowd dispersed. Once the last Marine had gone about his duties, Johnson told me the

supervisor wanted to see me after I had delivered the message to the bridge. I nodded and began to do the push-ups.

Afterwards, I took the message and jogged my way to the bridge, reading the paper as I went a long. It just had to do with the awards ceremony and the Master Chief. I hadn't seen the SPARTAN-II soldier in anything other than newsvids, but I had heard about him. The chatter amongst the youngest Marines was that he was an eight-foot-tall cyborg, with armor as thick as hull plating, and energy shields that could survive an atom bomb. I chuckled to myself.

I dropped the paper off at the bridge, taking the time to smirk enticingly at a brown-haired female ensign. I walked to Recreation R-01, where my supervisor, Sergeant Major ZoÃ« Stevens, usually hung out. She was sharing a coffee with an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper by the name of John Cullis. The 'Helljumpers' had a reputation for being slightly crazed, and this man was no exception. While I waited for them to finish, I leaned against the wall near a plant stand. My friend, Lance Corporal Vic Doyle, approached me, and we shared some idle chatter.

"Dude," he began, stepping up to me, holding a cola. "Rumor has it the Covvies are going to attack soon."

I shook my head, grinning. "How would anyone know? There are never any signs that they are going to attack. Nobody knew about Reach, 'til it happened."

"Yeah, I guesso." He admitted, also grinning. Our conversation dissolved into discussing the latest 'hot crew babe'.

Vic walked away a few minutes later, heading towards Commons R-01. By now, Stevens was sipping the coffee alone with a thoughtful expression on her face. I walked up and saluted. She returned it with a grin, offering the vacant seat. I sat down.

"Yes, ma'am?" I asked, once I was seated.

"Yes, ma'am, what?" ZoÃ« returned.

"You wanted me for something, ma'am?" I continued, completely aware of the sergeant's way of dealing with her troops.

She sipped her coffee, looking upwards. The sergeant major was my age, and I was amazed by how good she looked, even in military fatigues. The men never voiced it, but I was sure my fellows believed the same. And she knew it, too, by the way she ran rings around us.

Finally, the sergeant answered, "I'm promoting you, corporal. You've been a good soldier, ever since the first time we met."

I beamed at her. It seemed I had never gotten a promotion in all the years of military service: seven. I was now twenty-three, and I hadn't gotten a single promotion since my first battle with the Covenant, when I was moved from private to lance corporal.

"Thank you, Sergeant Major," I said happily.

"No problem, Corporal Nathan Price." She smiled at me again.
"Dismissed."

I stood and trotted away, following Vic's footsteps to Commons R-01. I walked in, and immediately spotted two PDA "Public Displays of Affection" violations. Tensions were high ever since the rumor of an attack on earth had started. Many of the Marines were willing to risk a court martial for a family, or even something . . . _briefer. _I cast my gaze around until I saw Vic, whom I strode up to.

He was flirting with a young private that had recently been transferred from the Malta. She was a pretty redhead, only sixteen. I grinned and watched.

After she had strutted off with an immense smirk on her face, towards the other girls, I stepped up to him. Vic was grinning too; maybe he had landed a 'bunkroom meet' with her. "How'd that go?" I asked him.

"Ah, pretty good, pretty good," He returned. Leaning towards me, he confirmed my thoughts.

I looked at him seriously. "Careful, mate," I warned, "You know if you get caught, there'll be a court-martial."

Vic laughed. "Just because you can't get a girl, don't come preaching regulations to me."

"Yeah, whatever." I cracked another grin. "Guess what?"

The other Marine raised an eyebrow. "You met the Master Chief, and he turned out to be a bisexual pedophile," Vic guessed.

I laughed, but replied, "No. You should be calling me sir, now, _lance _corporal."

"No way!" Vic grinned. "_You_ got a promotion?" Vic Doyle had only been with the Marines for a year, and he knew my track record.

"Yeah, and from Sergeant Stevens."

"Oh, yeah? She _smitten_ with you?" He laughed, loudly.

"Maybe, maybe," I chuckled. "Well, I better be off now," I said, giving him a friendly punch on the shoulder. "Good luck tonight."

I walked off, this time heading toward the hangars. For most of the Marines, today was a day off, because of the award ceremony later that day. From what I had heard, Commander Keyes, the Master Chief, and Sergeant Johnson would be there.

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Two hours later, I watched as the train arrived outside of the award ceremony chamber. It pulled up beside Vic and I, and the Spartan stepped out. At first, I didn't recognize him "his armor had changed since the Master Chief had last appeared in the newsvids. Sergeant Johnson followed him out, nodding at me.

I watched with fascination as the duo marched towards the chamber. I managed to catch the Master Chief say something about cameras, in a deep, throaty voice. The sergeant answered him, but his reply was lost to the rising voices. As the door opened, I managed to catch a glance of Lord Hood before the door closed again. Vic and I would wait outside, so we could see the Master Chief when he came back out . . .

2. Assault

Warrior: Thanks for the review. Yep, I just loved Nathan so much . . .

* * *

><p>Section I

****Cairo Station****

****Part I: Assault****

* * *

> <p>The award ceremony was cut short.<p>

I stood outside the chamber where Lord Hood had been addressing UNSC personnel. The Covenant fleet had already engaged Fleet Admiral Harper around the Athens, Malta, and Cairo. Boarding ships were on the way, which was just dandy.

Vic was down the stairs, with Sergeant Johnson and a girl. Weapons had been spread out over a series of cargo boxes. I trotted down the stairs, taking an SMG, when the Master Chief walked in. I stared upwards as the towering green monolith stepped down the stairs, took a Battle Rifle and two SMGS. Without a word, he marched down the second flight of stairs. Johnson, Vic, the girl, and another sergeant in a uniform started off into the next room. I followed them.

As I entered, someone from the Malta spoke over the comm: "Stand by . . . Relax. Check your targets; watch the crossfire. Their standard formation: little bastards up front, big ones in back. Good luck, Cairo." After the message, I looked out the huge glass panels on one side of the room. Plasma volleys and huge, blue lasers cut through space. Boarding craft popped like balloons. Occasionally, a human frigate or cruiser would explode in a dazzling orange splash.

A moment later, a boarding craft docked with the Cairo just beyond the bulkhead. I could see it clearly through the glass. Sergeant Johnson began unfolding a mobile 30-caliber gun turret, shouting, "Feel the fire on that bulkhead! Soon as it opens up, let 'em have it."

The Master Chief dropped behind one of the titanium barriers set up below the platform Sergeant Johnson stood on. I dropped down there, standing beside the silent Vic Doyle. Indeed, a moment after Johnson's announcement, the bulkhead began to heat up. The sealed orange door was beginning to glow in the center. The door was on the other side of the room; several computer stations separated us from it. To the right, on another raised area, were a few more computers

and large screens that displayed the Cairo.

The glow grew. I could here the sounds of plasma fire and yelling of Marines on the other side. The glow spread across the bulkhead, and, in a burst of steel and smoke, it folded in and shattered. Without waiting for visual confirmation, the Master Chief unloaded the SMG magazines. A few Grunts managed to survive the initial barrage and escape the smoke, only to fall from the bullets. An Elite rushed forward, and the Marines attacked; I joined in, with my SMG. Its shields evaporated and the purple blood splashed across the floor as it went down.

The Chief ducked behind a larger barrier and reloaded. A second wave marched in, three Grunts and another Elite " I fired, and they fired back. The girl took a plasma shot and stumbled, whimpering from the burn. I ducked down behind the barrier and reloaded quickly. The MC finished reloading, and jumped back out, slicing through the remaining Grunts. An Elite evaded by ducking behind the computers; the Master Chief rushed forward, emptying shells into the alien's shields as he went. Once in hand-to-hand-combat range, the Spartan slammed one SMG into the Elite's face, and the shields broke. In the other hand, he stuffed the other sub-machine gun into its stomach, and unloaded the magazine. The alien went limp as the bullets pierced its stomach.

I watched with amazement. The Master Chief dropped one SMG and rolled back as two Elites rushed into the room, which happened to be Recreation R-01. He dropped behind one of the computers and switched to the Battle Rifle. I raised my SMG over the barrier and fired on the Elites as they dropped down onto the floor from a raised hallway. Vic, who covered the narrow path between the computers and the raised area, fired at them with a Battle Rifle. The uniformed sergeant, who used a Magnum, also had a clear view. The girl was kneeling behind the larger barricade as her wound steamed. _Poor private_, I thought.

The Elites stayed behind the computers, using them as cover as their shields recharged. They both dual-wielded plasma pistols.

The MC strafed across our side of the room, firing when he got a clear look at his enemies. One was shot in the head, caught with its shields down. The other tried to escape, jumping foolishly straight into Johnson's line of fire. He filled it full of 30-calibur lead, just as yet another wave marched into Recreation R-01. Chief took point, slaughtering the first few Grunts. His shields took a few hits from the Elite before he killed it.

Drunk with excitement, I called, "Attack!" The Marines, Johnson, and the Spartan jogged into the next room, through the broken bulkhead. It was dark and smoke filled the air. I knelt beside a dead Marine, face scarred from plasma fire. Sadly, I removed the dog tag and looked to the left; there were more barriers, and more Covenant beyond them. The Master Chief charged in, and I recognized the sound of turret somewhere in his vicinity.

The MC eliminated the Elites with a combo of SMG fire and melee attacks. Vic told him that the Marines would remain here; silently, he disappeared out of my sight. Sergeant Johnson turned toward the destruction of the bulkhead. The Marines assembled.

As we grouped together down the hall, by a surviving bulkhead, I stared blankly at the girl. She was gritting her teeth and whimpering from _a plasma hit?_ It was just one. I had taken dozens, maybe even hundreds, in the time I had been in the UNSC.

I glanced at Vic. He raised one eyebrow at the girl. She whimpered. Sergeant Johnson and the unnamed uniformed sergeant strode up to us. Before Johnson could say a word, I thrust out the dead Marine's dog tag. He took it from me and glanced at the name.

"Good job, Marines," the other sergeant began. "They're not all gonna be like this . . ."

Yeah, yeah, I thought. Were we going to follow the MC?

After the first sergeant had finished, Johnson ordered, "Head through that door. Our orders are to cut the Covenant off at their source, and we're gonna do it."

That door led to the boarding ship the first Covenant had come out of, and then into a narrow hall. Johnson told the injured Marine to guard the boarding vessel as we entered the narrow hallway, and immediately into the line of fire of two Covenant Plasma Turrets. Seeing no cover, I launched myself back into the first room, but Vic got hit in the leg. He fell into a prone position and shot the two Grunts using the turrets.

"Heh? Nice, that, huh?" He told me, clenching his leg. The good thing about plasma was the cleanliness. It caused nothing more than a burn. The white-uniformed sergeant bandaged his wound, and we continued down the hall. It was obvious the Covenant had been through here; a dead crew member here, a heap of debris there . . .

The next area was Hangar A-01. We went through two doors and emerged onto a catwalk above the hangar; a Pelican was docked on the other side of the hangar. There were quite a few cargo boxes below, and I immediately noticed several Elites stalking between them. The white-uniformed sergeant and Vic remained on the catwalks as I leapt down. Sergeant Johnson followed me, now gripping a BR55 Battle Rifle.

I landed on one of the cargo boxes, which I slid down from. The Elites noticed the Marines on the catwalk, and began firing their plasma rifles. Luckily, they did not notice Johnson or me drop down.

The sergeant stepped up to me and whispered in my ear: "Corporal, stay here and provide cover fire. I'll push these bastards back." As the sergeant disappeared into the maze of boxes, gunfire erupted from the catwalks. I stepped out from cover and fired at the Elites, emptying half the magazine. The enemy â€" six Elites, no Grunts â€" ducked in and out of cover, behind boxes and the catwalk supports. As the aliens turned their attention to me, Johnson began lobbing grenades into their midst. I cracked a grin as the blue-armored Elites screeched and sprinted away, mandibles flapping.

Sergeant Johnson appeared from cover, blasting away with the Battle Rifle. I joined in the suppression fire as the Elites stumbled behind the Pelican and through a doorway on the other side of the hangar. As the surviving four disappeared, Sergeant Johnson told Vic to come

with him, and for me and the other sergeant to remain here. The two Marines followed the Elites into the next chamber.

Already feeling tired; I trotted up to the windows and looked out. The glass panels offered an excellent view of the Malta, Athens, and numerous other Super MAC-gun platforms. Earth and her moon offered a despairing backdrop to the space combat.

A few Marines walked into the hangar, interrupting my observations. One set up a turret next to the still-unnamed sergeant; the other joined me. He also held an SMG, and he was very beat up. Half of his face was bleeding; red blood also seeped from various places in his fatigues. I blinked, and turned back to the glass panel.

Suddenly, two shapes appeared through the haze of battle. They were growing; as soon as they came close enough, I recognized the ships as boarding craft. One slammed into the glass panel I was looking at with a crack. The other connected with the next hangar over.

Our boarding vessel began eating through the glass. I yelped and leapt behind cover, readying my SMG. I was down to 54 rounds of ammunition, plus the clip already shoved into the weapon. The glass pane popped out, revealing a purple shield-type thing that stayed only for a moment before the boarding ship began to expel Covenant troops. The injured Marine moved behind the catwalk supports.

A few Grunts and an Elite were spewed out of the craft. The turret above immediately fired; something green in my peripheral vision caught my eye. The Master Chief! He moved over the catwalks, and took over the turret. The Elite launched itself behind a box near the opening into the boarding craft, safely out of the way of the turret. I pulled a fragmentation grenade from my belt, pulled the pin, and hurriedly cast it behind the box. A satisfying pop and resulting explosion sent the Elite's lifeless body careening through the air. Immediately afterwards, even as a few surviving Grunts screamed and waddled in circles, a second wave of Covenant was thrust out of the boarding vessel.

I slowly sidestepped to get a clear view of the enemy. The Master Chief nailed most of the Grunts with the turret as they came out of the craft; the Elite immediately took cover, and the Marines aimed for the surviving Grunts. A few of my bullets pierced a Grunt, just as the Elite leapt over the cover and growled at me. I screamed. It held up its plasma rifle, and I held down the SMG trigger until the rounds stopped coming. The riddled corpse fell backwards.

Giggling insanely, I dropped back behind the catwalk supports as a third wave of Covenant entered the hangar. The Master Chief, finishing with the turret, openly dropped down and swung a plasma rifle like a club. Two Grunts went down; an Elite tried to bludgeon the Chief with its own rifle, but the Spartan's fist grabbed the weapon and pulled it out of the alien's grasp. Now dual-wielding two Plasma Rifles, the MC loaded the Elite with plasma.

No more Covenant were forthcoming. Sighing, and pulling myself together, I walked to the glass panels. Small flashes of cyan drifted away from one of the Orbital Platforms. Noticing this, I announced, "Hey! The Malta's already driven off its borders."

Over the helmet comm, I heard Cortana ask for Malta's status. There

was cheering from the other platform, and suddenly . . . a blinding light. I dropped to the ground, covering my eyes, when a shudder rocked the Cairo. Opening my eyes again, I saw pieces of debris spread across the space Malta had been in. What the hell?

All was silent in the hangar, until the door Sergeant Johnson had run through earlier exploded outwardly. I looked backwards, just as more Covenant burst into the room. I spun around and fired on them, as the Master Chief through plasma grenades at them. One caught an Elite squarely in its large chest. A moment later, it exploded, killing the remaining aliens.

I sighed, knowing that this battle wasn't finished yet. I gathered myself together, lifted a few SMG clips off a dead Marine, and followed the MC into the next area.

3. Priority Shift

This chapter was pretty short, and not that great, and this will be the shortest section. Earth is soundin' better, though.

* * *

> <p>Section I

****Cairo Station****

****Part II: Priority Shift ****

The Master Chief led the way into the next hangar. We passed through a broken bulkhead, and into a dark room, filled with debris and smoke. A dead Marine in a white-uniform greeted us; the MC kneeled beside the corpse and removed the dog tag before moving on.

We marched through a bend, and the Spartan continued into the hangar. Two barriers had been set up where I stood, just before the hangar; there were multiple human corpses, a turret, and a few weapons. Moving into Hangar A-02, I glanced at the MC as he sniped two Grunts on the walkway above. The room was almost exactly the same as the former; except it was missing a Pelican and no Marines dominated the catwalks. There were four plasma turrets above.

I ambled through the maze of cargo boxes and hugged the wall opposite the glass panels. While the huge green Spartan attracted the attention of the aliens, I moved through a broken bulkhead. I could now see the second part of the hangar clearly: the boarding ship, a few energy barriers, and many Covenant. I raised my SMG, and began to fire half-heartedly at them. Drawing attention myself was not on my priority list.

The Master Chief's fire brought down one Elite; almost subsequently, a second wave of Covenant began to file out of the craft. Two Grunts caught sight of me and fired with their plasma pistols as the Marines and the MC attacked from the side. I retreated behind a bulkhead and waited for the fire to discontinue. I poked my head back out; the Grunts were dead, but I caught sight of a shield-less Elite taking cover behind a cargo crate. I aimed my SMG and scored a few hits, but not enough to kill it. Instead, it stumbled backwards and right into the Spartan's line-of-fire. Unsurprisingly, it went down.

A third wave spilled out of the boarding craft. I sighed exasperatedly. So many waves . . .

A plasma blast whizzed past my ear. I screeched and leapt behind a crate, and listened to the sounds of gunfire. I heard a Marine cry out, and a few more Grunt sobs. I ducked out again and held down the SMG's trigger. A few Grunts went down, and the Elite's shields flickered. The Master Chief, now holding a Plasma Rifle and a Magnum, rushed forward and finished it off.

I put my hands on my knees and exhaled. That should have been the last boarding craft on our side of Cairo station. The battle was over.

Dread suddenly filled my veins as a Marine called, "Uh-oh. Hey, they're leaving the Athens . . ." A moment later, a shudder passed over the Cairo. I sprinted over to the glass panels, and watched the debris spiral through space.

I heard Cortana and Lord Hood converse over the comm. The AI "Cortana" believed the explosion to be a bomb, brought aboard the Malta and Athens by the Covenant. Fleet Admiral Hood ordered the Master Chief to find the one onboard the Cairo.

"Crap, I thought glumly. Our boat could pop at any moment.

The Master Chief disappeared into the MAC storage room below. The Marines loitered around for the moment, reloading weapons, dragging corpses away, and collecting dog tags. For the moment, we were lacking in duties.

Only for the moment. Soon, Sergeant Johnson bustled into the hangar through the broken bulkhead. His white dress uniform was splashed with purple and blue blood. He still held a Battle Rifle, though.

Sighing, groaning, and complaining, the Marines assembled. Sergeant Johnson looked over them, called out a few insults before informing us of our mission. "More Covenant are holed up deeper in the station." He told us. "We need to dig them out.

"Locklear, Price, come with me," the sergeant ordered. "Alex and Rodriguez" stay here, guard the area."

I followed Sarge and the other Marine through the broken bulkhead and into a long hall. "This'll lead to Security B-01, where they're campin' out," Johnson told us, before plowing on. The hall was obviously a sight of battle; there were pockmarks from plasma, and bullet holes dotted the walls. Many dead Grunts and a few dead Marines littered the floor.

We passed by another door, and kept going until we arrived at another locked bulkhead. Johnson tapped on a nearby keypad until the door ponderously opened up. Two Grunts beyond the door hopped in surprise as they saw us; we immediately gunned them down. Sergeant Johnson led us up a staircase, and into Security B-01. Four Elites" two with red armor" were waiting, and a few Grunts were also waddling about. Johnson burst in guns blazing; Locklear leapt in, and immediately took two Plasma Rifle shots in the chest. I fired a burst

of bullets before ducking behind a computer console. Self-preservation is always wise.

Closing my eyes, I unpinned a frag grenade and tossed it over the console. It exploded, though I did not see the results. There was a burst of plasma fire, and I heard Sergeant Johnson's muffled cheer, "Good job, Corporal!"

There was two more Battle Rifle bursts, and then silence. I glanced up, and saw the corpses, including the other Marine's. Sergeant Johnson still stood. He dragged me up, and I caught a glance of the room below: Commons R-02. Covenant troops were filing in, though I didn't mention it to Johnson. He didn't notice, and we continued into the next room.

"These are the umbilicals," Johnson told me as we entered the hall. I kneeled down behind two small boxes, and checked the passage for Covenant. Empty, except for the corpse of a uniformed sergeant.

The sound of gunfire exploded from ahead. Plasma fire erupted from a passageway leading off back to the hangars. Suddenly, hopping over a small crate came a slim female figure in the gray unisex uniform of UNSC bridge crew. She came sprinting full-speed toward us and ended in a sprawl. Two more white-uniformed Marines appeared from the passageway, slowly retreating toward us and firing Battle Rifle bursts toward the emerging Covenant.

"Ma'am," Johnson said to the woman, helping her up. "Corporal, this is Commander Keyes," he jerked his head at the black-haired commander. I blinked, and saluted. Johnson continued, "I want you to head back to the hangars, Price."

I nodded and glanced at the Elites and approaching Marines. Two Grunts fell, dead, as I watched. I raised my SMG and fired one the Elites, and plasma fire came at me in answer. Ducking behind the cover, I waited for the other Marines to finish the Elites before standing and running down the corridor. I banked to the right, and headed down the next hallway, leading directly back to the hangars.

As I entered, I listened to the lovely sound of silence. Hangar A-02 was empty; I proceeded to Hangar A-01, just as the Pelican within burst to life. A familiar voice called, "Nathan! Come on, we're heading down the Earth!"

I trotted to the back of the Pelican, and entered by stepping into the troop space. The familiar voice belonged to Vic Doyle; Zoã« Stevens was inside, too. Surveying the Marines and strapping in, I asked why.

"A Covenant carrier is making a break for Africa, we've heard. We're being sent down!" He exclaimed excitedly. I gripped the metal bars beside the seat as the Pelican lifted off, and headed into space.

4. Hard Drop

****Section II****

****Earth****

****Hard Drop****

The Pelican slowly descended, soaring above New Mombasa. ZoÃ« stood by the hatch, looking out over the bright city. Vic Doyle sat silently, beside four other Marines. I quietly poked the BR55 I held in my hands.

"Who was first contact?"

"405th out of Diego Garcia - but don't expect a big welcome. Covenant ground forces wiped most of them out before they hit the ground."

I listened to the chatter between Sergeant Stevens and the pilot anxiously. Plasma bombs exploded around the Pelican, causing it to rock now and then. Even from this altitude, I could hear the sound of gunfire and Longsword fighters making air strikes. I glanced out the hatch behind us, and saw the street rising up to meet the Pelican. Below, several tiny Marines were suppressing a group of Jackals, but we left them behind.

The dropship began to slow, and the landing gear unfolded. It turned slightly, giving us a view of our LZ - several dozen Marines, including at least ten Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. Beyond, down the street, Covenant troops were being pinned down. A Warthog had been flipped over, along with quite a few civilian vehicles.

ZoÃ« Stevens dropped out of the Pelican, and the Marines followed. I slid out, and followed the sergeant major as she trotted down the sidewalk, heading towards an ODSF that seemed to be giving out orders. The concrete beneath us was cracked in several places - no surprise there - but I could also see where the road had buckled on a street heading towards the city-center. Only something big could do that.

Vic fell in behind me, and we jogged up to the ODSF. The soldier's face was disguised beneath a black helmet with a black visor, and their body covered by a black protective suit. They looked like mini MC's to me.

"Colonel!" ZoÃ« said, saluting. The ODSF turned and muttered "At ease" in a deep ethnic voice. The black visor turned to me, and I noticed both Vic and ZoÃ« were still saluting. I did, too, snapping my hand to my forehead. The helmet nodded, and we three relaxed.

"What're our orders, sir?" Stevens asked him. He did seem to have a pretty good grip on the battle, and he told me to follow the sergeant to reinforce the fire teams, while Vic went with an assault team. I recognized the antiquated "Find, Fix, Finish" strategy as Sergeant Stevens led me to a group of Marines firing from behind a red F-2000 pickup truck. The team was dousing suppressive fire on the pinned Covenant, which were taking cover behind a barricade of vehicles.

A Marine with a comm backpack and the nametag "Banks" told us to aim for the sides. I noticed they were each focusing on different areas of the barricade. The man was a good leader.

As I unloaded my precious ammunition, I watched from the corner of my

eye as Vic, and ODS, and two Marines moved into position. Apparently, the Covenant did not notice them as they ducked behind a fallen billboard for a French restaurant. Another assault team flanked from the other side, and took cover behind a dumpster. Banks pulled a frag grenade from his belt, and another Marine with a Cuban accent told me that was the signal. Banks threw the pineapple over the pickup truck and behind the barricade. Several Covenant threw themselves into our line of fire, and the assault teams instantly sprang from their positions. I helped take out the panicking Grunts out in the open, while Vic and the other team whittled away the Elites. Once they were dead, our force joined up again next to the commanding ODS.

"Good job," he told us without much gusto. "Sergeant Banks, take Corporal Perez and several men to secure that building -" he pointed across the street - "and use it as a CP." He then turned his finger towards Zoã, then Vic, then me. "You three, take that Warthog and reinforce the platoon on the bridge."

Without further ado, Zoã grabbed my arm and led Vic and I to the Warthog. He took the side seat and I took the gunner's - Stevens drove. I took note that my friend Doyle held a S2-AM sniper rifle.

The Warthog sped away from the designated CP. We went around a corner, where I immediately spotted two Elites having a friendly, weaponless conversation at the other end of the street. Vic picked them off before I could warm up the vehicle's chain gun. Stevens turned again, and we went past an artificial waterfall and out into an open park.

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It all seemed utterly peaceful when we pulled up next to the Marine platoon. Zoã dropped from the driver's seat and approached the group, and took up a conversation with one of them. I glanced around: we were on a high bridge, looking out over the waterway and the two Mombasas. Plasma bombs still floated through the sky occasionally, but all was peaceful. And the ODS commander had said "reinforce this platoon"?

I joined Sergeant Major Stevens and another Marine. "You're the highest-ranking soldier here, now," he told the sergeant. She nodded, and he continued: "Everything's damn quiet now, but it won't be for long. We've had reports of a Scarab heading this way."

There were groans from the Marines. "What's a Scarab?" I asked. The other humans looked at me as if I had grown mandibles. I blinked.

"A Scarab is a Covenant armored vehicle, and it's big," Vic said, in way of explanation.

"Okay, like a Wraith?" I asked him.

"Nope." He said.

"No, it's a lot bigger," the Marine that had been addressing Zoã told me. It has four legs, two plasma cannons, and one big-ass super laser thingy." I nodded.

A younger Marine, without a helmet, suddenly ran up to us, gasping for breath. Dread iced my veins as the man breathed, "Cov'nant vehicles, approaching from the city-center. Luck'ly, they're still pretty far away, on the other side of the bridge. We've set up a mine near the middle o' the bridge, and that'll give 'em a nasty surprise."

The Marines, including myself, turned as one and looked out across the bridge. Several blue lights appeared over the arc - Ghosts, boosting - and less than a second later a plume of fire reached up into the sky. No more Ghosts, until a Wraith and several more appeared to replace it.

There was another sound from behind us, but most of the soldiers had already spread out to take their places. A few took to the Warthog, but didn't drive away with it. Most of them began stacking up behind the tollbooths or by the entrance to the bridge, which curved inward and snapped forward, so there were walls Marines could hide behind.

I glanced backwards, and saw a Pelican zoom overhead. _That must be what is making so much noise_, I thought, until a thick green beam impaled the dropship. The beam came from behind the bridge, on the Old Mombasa side. The Pelican disappeared in a cloud of smoke and fire that dropped into the water below the bridge.

"Ah shit!" I heard one of the Marines call. "It's a fuc-" the rest of his sentence was cut off, as a huge spherical head-like thing thrust itself over the gateway into the tollbooths. A huge plasma cannon behind it immediately began spurting out blobs of molten plasma, which burned away at the Marine that had been speaking. I immediately ran for cover as a huge leg dropped onto the bridge, and then another. "The Scarab!" someone screamed.

The Ghosts chose this time to appear. The Marines stacked up by the aforementioned walls immediately ambushed them, firing on the motorcycle-like vehicles. One ignored them and fired at the Warthog before the chain gun could fire off a volley; the thick blue plasma blobs melted through the glass and the driver's face, and soon after the gunner's chest. I watched in horror as the other Ghost turned on the stacked-up Marines.

I threw myself behind a trashcan. The Scarab had unfurled its final leg, and was now visibly charging up its main cannon. It fired another green beam, washing it over the Marines on one side of the wall - at least a half-dozen, killing them all. Despite the gunfire now bouncing off the undercarriage, it began stomping away.

"Marines!" ZoÃ« called to get the survivor's attention. "Get a rocket volley and some 40-cal on that thing!"

The Ghosts had retreated for the moment, boosting away the moment they heard the word "rocket". The Marines picked up a few heavy weapons, including what looked like a 40-caliber gun turret they had hid in one of the garage-like gates.

The began unleashing rocket after rocket, 40-cal after 40-cal. Indeed, not twenty feet ahead of us, the Scarab turned and observed the Marines like they were a platoon of pesky mosquitoes. The plasma

turret fired, and it began to charge up its main cannon. The plasma washed, again, across the Marine lines, and I winced. The main cannon fired, obliterating the 40-caliber turret and the remainder of the rockets.

I caught sight of Vic, suddenly, picking up one of the rocket launchers and aiming at the Scarab. I watched in silent panic as he fired off the weapon. Instead of boiling him alive with plasma and dissipating him with the main cannon, it took two steps forward and impaled him on one of the legs. Crying out, I closed my eyes and duck further behind the trash can. ZoÃ« screamed, "Vic!", barely audible over the Marine's own gurgles and shrieks.

5. David

****Section II****

****Earth****

****Part II: David****

Breathing hard, I looked up to see the Master Chief walking calmly toward us. ZoÃ« didn't notice; she was focusing on the retreating Scarab.

The Spartan stepped over me; I was too exhausted to move. He held a BR55 battle rifle, just like ZoÃ« and I. He stood beside the sergeant major as she reported without turning, "It blew right through us. 50 cal, rockets, didn't do a thing."

Humming filled the air as I struggled to my feet. A Pelican dived toward us, with a Scorpion MBT locked into the back, beneath the tail. It floated downwards and dropped the M808B main battle tank onto the ground with a _thump._ Sergeant Johnson hopped from the passenger compartment onto the Scorpion, and then onto the ground. Relief washed over me: my mission was over!

He trotted over to ZoÃ« Stevens. "What happened to your platoon?"

"Wasted, sarge."

I stepped forward, muttering, "And we will too, sir, if we don't get the hell outta here."

Johnson stopped me with his arm. "You hit, Marine?"

"Uhh, no, sir," I answered hesitantly.

He pushed me back. "Then listen up!" the sergeant yelled. "When I joined to corps, we didn't have any _fancy-shmancy _tanks. We had sticks! Two sticks, and a rock, for the whole platoon! And we had to share the rock! Buck up, boy - you're one very lucky Marine."

I gulped, as ZoÃ« asked him about the Scarab. "We've all run the simulations. They're tough, but they ain't invincible. Stay with the Master Chief - he'll know what to do." Sergeant Stevens nodded as Johnson popped a cigar into his mouth and leapt back into the Pelican. I heard Cortana - the Master Chief's AI friend - say,

"Thanks for the tank. He never gets me anything."

Johnson pumped the machine gun turret in the passenger compartment. "Oh, I know what the ladies like." The Pelican hovered for a moment longer before ascending a few meters to drift over the side of the bridge.

Smirking, I picked up a dropped M41 SSR MAV/AW rocket launcher. "Ladies like grinding treads, huh, MC?"

"Shut up, Nathan," Sergeant Major Stevens ordered. I grinned and hopped onto the side of the Scorpion. She sat on the opposite side as the Master Chief entered the hatch. The engine roared to life and the big tank began to lumber off.

Already ahead, I could see the bright purple glows of two boosting Ghosts. The MC drove the rumbling Scorpion towards them; we passed numerous toppled cars, trucks, and vans. The civvies had bugged out at the first sign of danger.

Once the Ghosts were within about 50 meters, the Master Chief began firing the 90mm main cannon. The shell's splash damage sent one into the air, but it landed correctly and both immediately began moving towards us. I raised the rocket launcher and engaged the homing mechanism; looking into the scope, a red reticule had appeared on the nearest Ghost. I pulled back the "trigger", releasing the rocket with a _whumph. _Heat from the launch warmed up my back; the missile blasted forward and zoomed towards the Ghost. It landed a direct hit right on the nose, and the alien craft exploded.

The Spartan inside the tank began dealing out belts of 7.62 mm tracer ammunition while Stevens fired her BR55 ineffectually. The Ghost never came close enough to make a pass.

Without missing a beat, the 'Chief continued onwards, across the bridge. The Covenant had obviously had time to fortify it; we encountered many Ghosts and a Wraith before a Phantom came whizzing over our heads. It continued on, but soon another passed us on the left, and began unloading its three plasma turrets. I, being on the port side of the tank, leapt off and ducked behind a car with the spontaneity of a survivalist. The tank fired on it, and soon the plasma stopped coming - but now Ghosts were appearing over the crest of the bridge. I tried to make myself smaller as the tank moved forward, but one of the Ghosts caught sight of me. I jumped to my feet and ran in the way we had came, soon gasping for breath from the weight of the rocket launcher. Then, there was a boom, and I glanced behind me to see a broken and battered Ghost, flipping at high speeds towards me. The bulk of the dead machine hit my back, and I fell face-first into the concrete.

XXX

Groggily, I looked up into a mandibled face. Screaming, I flailed backwards, pushing the Elite back. It didn't budge; finally, I realized it was dead. The destroyed Ghost lay behind the corpse, now in two pieces from the after-pop, as I called it.

Standing up, I looked around. The Scorpion tank was gone. So was the Phantoms, and the Ghosts, except for the pieces they had left behind. I turned around - from here, I could see the entire far side of the

bridge, including New Mombasa and the Covenant cruiser. The tollbooths below were smoking; dozens of burning hulks and pieces of Ghost lay a path to them. Looking closer, I caught sight of the tank disappearing into the highway tunnels. I hadn't been unconscious for too long.

I began trotting downwards, and keeping an eye out for usable Ghosts. Knowing the Master Chief, which I didn't, there were none. About halfway from where I had been knocked out to the tollbooths, another Phantom dropship appeared overhead. It flew low, and sped towards my destination. Without wasting time, it dropped off a few Elites and a good number of Grunts.

The dropship ascended over the highway tunnel, and sped off into the city. The troops it had disgorged quickly unfolded turrets and gathered semi-destroyed Ghosts. Whipping out my binoculars for a closer look, I watched as the Grunts set to work repairing the vehicles and setting up the plasma turrets. Most of the Elites disappeared into the tunnel, well behind the tank, but three others remained. Pushing the binoculars back into my fatigues, I looked around. There! The platoon I had encountered not an hour ago had been through here, and had left behind a few casualties. Hidden beside one of the toppled vans was a dead Marine. I pulled out the former soldier's backpack and dug around inside. He had carried pieces of an S2 AM sniper rifle. A small part of the barrel had been broken off, so it wouldn't be as accurate, but of the weapon was intact. He had also held four magazines - enough for me to take out the entire enemy force, if they weren't alerted to my presence.

I climbed up the side of the bridge and went prone. Setting the sniper rifle stand up, I looked down the 10x scope and surveyed the enemy position. Two of the remaining Elites were chatting with an unhappy Grunt; the other one was testing out a Ghost the aliens had rapidly reconstructed. The Elite boosted it up one of the ramps on the side of the highway tunnel; without warning, the Ghost exploded beneath him and sent the alien flying. I chuckled as I watched the now-furious Elite stand up and stalk towards the Grunts. With some hand movements, it sent them back to the Ghost, and everyone's back was turned to the angry alien. I moved the crosshairs right over its head and fired.

None of the other Covenant noticed. I stood up and hopped back down into the street. Dashing forward, I climbed up onto a moving truck, allowing me an excellent view of the other Elites. The Grunt was now walking towards the other mechanics. One of the Elites, standing with its back facing the wall, noticed its dead counterpart on the concrete. Fortunately for me, the final Elite was watching the Grunt mechanics work. I dropped the second alien with a _crack _from the sniper rifle.

Unluckily, the third and final commanding alien heard my weapon that time, and whipped around to see its counterparts dead. Without hesitation, I fired off the remainder of my magazine, dropping it, too. The Grunts panicked and stopped working in an attempt to take cover.

Putting the sniper rifle down, I rushed back to pick up the rocket launcher. My BR55 was strapped to my back, I had my heavy weapon - I was ready to move on down.

Once in range, I set the rocket launcher down and pulled out the battle rifle. The Grunts had recovered and were back to their work; stupid things, I took down three before they panicked again. This time, I grabbed the rocket launcher again and sprinted into the tunnel.

With the Grunts behind me, I trotted downwards. There was a mutilated Elite corpse and two dead Grunts down here, too; moving forwards, I was able to see the floodgate that blocked the road. There were more abandoned civilian vehicles, and there was also a Warthog and the Scorpion. Three of the five-or-so Elites that had gone into the tunnel were manning the unmoving Warthog. I only had one rocket left into the rocket launcher, but that was enough to deal with them. I used the homing feature to destroy the vehicle and the crew before trotting down to the floodgate. I walked up a slope. From there, I could see a huge number of dead Covenant, and one dead Marine - hopping to the other side of floodgate, I strode over to the body and checked the dog tag. Thankfully, it wasn't Sergeant Major Stevens.

Most of the tunnel was cluttered with civilian vehicles. There was no sign of the remaining Elites; they must have gone on ahead. I moved past the second floodgate and into a side tunnel, which led out onto a huge man-made basin. A Warthog disappeared from sight, heading into the second part of the park. There were several Marines on the large platformed structure, fighting the Elites I had seen enter the tunnel. I could also see several Jackals with beam rifles pinning my allies down. I also spotted the Scarab, moving into the city.

6. Goliath

****Section II****

****Earth****

****Part III: Goliath****

I stumbled down to the group of Marines, fully suppressed by a large group of Jackal snipers. Bright blue beams sent bits of dust into the air. "Who was in that Warthog?" I asked them.

"The Master Chief, a sergeant major, and some rocket jock. And I don't mean a fighter pilot." He grimaced as a renewed wave of beam rifle fire came down on them. "I don't see a way of getting out of this one - any ideas?"

I observed his bloody nose and a Marine who had taken a beam through the kneecap. "Have an Elites come through here?"

"Yeah, they're down there. I wish the MC would have provided a bit more support, dontcha know?"

"Haha." I said noncommittally. "You have a rocket launcher here, I see." I pointed at a rocket launcher hidden in the rocks.

"Aye," he said blankly.

"You have a Jackal corpse, also, I see." I pointed at a Jackal corpse with a bullet wound in the head.

"Aye . . ." he grinned.

"I say we throw the corpse out into the open, over there," I pointed on the other side of the wall the Marines were hiding behind, "Then give them a taste of rocket."

"I agree," he said. "You heard him, boys, lets give those Jackals a taste of burn therapy."

Two Marines tossed the corpse a good distance away, and beams immediately smacked it, midair. A female Marine ducked out from cover and hit the group of Jackals with a rocket, taking them all out. Four of the Marines charged out of cover, and began firing on the Elites.

Before the Marine I was talking to ran off, I asked him, "What's burn therapy?" I grinned, and he gave me a rude hand gesture before clambering off. Joining them a moment later, I saw that the collective gunfire had killed all of the aliens.

"I'm Sergeant Georgie. Don't call me sir, you don't have to on the battlefield," the Marine held out his hand, and I shook it. "We'll leave three Marines here, and take the other two with us to follow the Warthog."

We set off, down into the basin and over the white structure. In the next area was the debris of a Wraith and many Ghosts. There was a small pond beneath another plat formed structure similar to the one we left behind. Moving slowly forward, we noticed a Phantom descending into the basin behind us.

"Uh-oh," Georgie grumbled. "Let's get over to that waterfall there," he pointed into the wall at the end of the park. A fountain waterfall spouted from the ceiling. "We can take cover from plasma inside there, and lay down a good ambush against the Covenant reinforcements."

Agreeing with him, we entered the waterfall conjunction, which led into a large street on the other side. Another Phantom came down in the park right behind us, and several Elites and Grunts were spewed from it. The two privates stacked up against the wall beside the opening into the park, while Georgie and I stood on the other side of the waterfall. A few seconds later, four Elites and eight Grunts entered. We jumped out, firing on them, but their plasma fire brought the privates down and forced us out into the street. Georgie jumped behind a car, but the plasma melted through the hood and the vehicle exploded; crying out, I ducked behind a trash can, just as a Warthog with a chain gun came around the corner. I recognized this as the street before the Marine HQ.

The Warthog powerslid right into the alien squad, sending Grunts into the waterfall. The Elites roared and cried out as the chain gun turned on them. Within moments, they were reduced to riddled corpses and the Warthog had driven away, obviously thinking both me and Georgie were dead. I ran to the broken car, and found Georgie a few meters away. He was badly burned, and blood was trickling down his lip to his blood-stained fatigues. One half of his face was badly disfigured.

Both of us whimpering, I threw him over my shoulder and began marching towards the HQ. To my great relief, the chain gun Warthog came around again and stopped beside us. I jumped in, and the driver said, "Ah, hell, I thought both of you were dead . . . Crap, I'll get you to the med place stat."

He threw the Warthog around a corner just before the Marine HQ. Hidden behind several boxes and crates was a doorway that led into an emergency MASH. I delivered Georgie to the ER, and returned to the Warthog. The driver told me, "The MC is already upstairs, engaging that bloody Scarab. If you hurry, you might be able to provide support."

I hurried two-at-a-time up the stairs and over the roof and up more stairs until I arrived at a long walkway with two bridges and a bend that led to an overhang. The Scarab was just turning the bend. I hoisted a rocket launcher and sprinted down to the third bridge. The Scarab had stopped at the entrance into the river that the bridge I had crossed previously spanned. The huge alien machine stopped.

I spotted the MC leaping onto the Scarab from the overhang. I sprinted to a turret, where two more Marines were watching the machine with interest. After a few minutes of silence, the Scarab coughed and a blue mist ascended into the air. The Master Chief exited the interior of the Scarab triumphantly, and a Pelican appeared beside it a moment later. After the tall Spartan entered the Pelican, it came up to us, and the two Marines and I jumped in.

The Pelican rose. Sergeant Johnson was in the cockpit, talking to Commander Keyes. I looked out the back of the troop compartment, watching as the city disappeared behind me. A moment later, the dropship entered the In Amber Clad. It immediately set off, and I jumped off from the Pelican, exhausted. A few seconds later, I felt the transition into Slipspace. Where could we be going, now?

7. Interception

Section III

Delta Halo

Interception

The sudden shift back into real space sent me flying into the bulkhead. Rubbing the side of my head, I pushed open the door and stepped into the empty corridor. I blinked and glanced around, listening for Commander Keyes' voice over the intercom, but none came.

Sighing, I began walking down the hallway as the In Amber Clad began to accelerate. As I passed a doorway, something hit me in the back of the head with a clang.

"Ouch!" I jumped around, just as a heavy black suit was thrust in my face. A muffled voice with a fake Australian accent shouted, "Aye, you! Yer the guy who brang in Georgie! Well, y'know what, you gotta replace 'im 'cause o' that!"

"Whut?" I muttered groggily, and something even heavier was thrust

into my arms. "There's yer flippin' helmet, corporal! Git it on, and meet us by the HEV pods!"

I heard the sound of boots walking away, and I pulled the black material from my face. It was an ODSST suit, and the helmet. A pair of clunky black boots had been set at my feet. "I didn't volunteer for this," I yelled at the guy, who disappeared around a corner without a further word. The Orbital Drop Shock Troops was a volunteer corps, known for bringing in the craziest soldiers on the Earth.

With a muttered "Why not?" to the air, I walked back to my bunk and exchanged my burnt, bloody, and blackened fatigues for the crisp new suit, which fit me perfectly. The visor within the mask was similar to the HUD on the Pillar of Autumn's Marine's helmet, which I had worn on a previous occasion. It showed a pulsing life reading in the bottom left corner, and the suit's condition above it. The bottom right hand corner listed the ODSST squad's names, with a three small green blocks that probably represented their life readings. My weapon's ammunition was shown at the top right hand corner, empty now. The whole thing was like something from a video game. I laughed, and headed out into the corner again.

Suddenly, a female voice came over the intercom: "Marine companies Achilles through Charlie, report to Pelican bay . . . Longsword flights A-1 through B-3, launch now . . . Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, companies Aria through Baltimore, report to HEV launchers . . ."

The Australian guy's voice crackled from my helmet. "That's us, mates, I'll meet you there. New guy - " he told me the directions to the HEV pods. I followed his orders and ended up in a dark hallway, where several ODSSTs were clunking about, some preparing their pods, others chatting like they did this every day. One of the troopers strolled up and punched me in the arm and guffawed stupidly. Another one of my faceless cohorts appeared at my shoulder; it turned out to be Australia. "'Kay, new mate, I'm Chips Dubbo. I'll be leadin' this liddle operation." He lead me to an empty HEV pod with the an iron plate bearing the name "SERGEANT MAJOR GEORGIE" and instructed me on its use. I was feeling increasingly nervous, now.

Finally finishing the crash course in HEV pod usage, Dubbo pushed me in and explained the mission. "We're landin' on this ring thingey, and we're gonna secure an LZ for the Pelican flights. Know, now, that there is a large chance that you will be blown off course, hit the ground too fast, miss the sight and plunge into the ocean, get shot down, and/or land in enemy territory. So have fun, mate." Chips closed the HEV pod door. I was now shaking visibly.

A few minutes later, Dubbo said over the comm, "'Kay, mates, we're about to launch. The other companies are ready, so finish up your final flight checks, and prepare for drop." There was a chorus of aye-ayes from the other squadmembers. I sat there trying to remember the first time I ate a candy bar when the floor dropped out beneath me.

The HEV pod was thrust into space. I yelped as my head was thrown back, the g-forces crushing my skin against my skull. The HUD on the helmet flickered, and I closed my eyes asmy last meal threatened to come up. I tried to push that particular picture to the back of my mind.

After a few more minutes, we entered the "ringworld"'s atmosphere. At this thought, I struggled to remember where I first heard this term, as the increasing g-forces and heat fogged my brain. As we plunged towards a ground I couldn't see, Chips Dubbo came over the comm again: "Cross your fingers, mates, we're comin' under fire from the Covenant. New guy, you might want to straighten up your course, you're headin' is way off."

Panic exploded inside me. I looked around and began tapping buttons. Something crunched within the HEV pod, and I stopped. Sweat was now dripping down my face and stinging my eyes within the helmet; I wondered whether I would feel pain when I hit the ground.

Suddenly, a button flashed red. I punched it, and another ominous creaking broke out from within the pod, and then a ripping from the outside. I began praying under my breath . . . The pod began to slow . . .

CRUNCH. What little I could see within my small space went dark. A moment later, I blinked back into awakening. Two of names on the HUD were flashing red (G. McMillan, R. Hoff), and all three of the green boxes on each were dark red. C. Dubbo was fine; also were two others.

Experimentally, I moved my limbs, making sure I was as intact as the HUD told me. I punched another flashing button, and the HEV pod's doorway popped open with a hiss. I grabbed the BR55 the ODSTs provided me and crawled into the open.

I was lying near a copse of twisted trees. Several rocks had been blown to pieces from my crash; they were laying amongst the grass. Apparently, I landed near a lake; I could hear the sound of water splashing against a cliffside. Standing up, I saw the pod had landed very close to a cliff edge. I saw a firefight going on at the other side of the lake; I could see a few dark HEV pods and a few human figures, including a tall green one. _I suppose I have landed off-course_, I thought, sighing inwardly. Turning from the lake, I looked up; I was standing at the foot of a winding path between the trees, heading upwards. I began trudging upwards.

End
file.